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Discordianism

Established between 1958/59, the Discordian Society was a collaborative project initiated by two high school students from the Los Angeles suburbs, Greg Hill (b. 1941- 2000) and Kerry Thornley (b. 1938-1998). It was not until after this pair re-located to the French Quarter of New Orleans in the early 1960s that they formalized the doctrines of their religious fellowship. In short, these doctrines reject the concepts of order and disorder as illusions projected onto chaos, which Discordians glorify as the counter-entropic life force. Instead of associating chaos with conflict or violence, members of the society regard it as the natural order of the universe, and honored it as synonymous with the Far Eastern principle of the Dao. Until the mid-1960s, the practice of Discordianism was confined to the circulation of tracts and epistles dealing with the finer points of the doctrine. This formerly scholastic society of roughly a dozen members, though, turned militant after its leading figures discovered psychedelicism, the esoteric doctrine of sacramental theology famously evangelized by Timothy Leary. The integration of LSD into Discordian beliefs led to "Operation Mindfuck", a decentralized program of clandestine cultural subversion that continues to the present day. Their scheme, of which more will be said shortly, was designed to counter the US government's programmatic persecution of psychedelists. As to the society's categorization as "Neo-Pagan" (→Paganism), it is true that its founders adopted the Greek goddess of discord, Eris, as their patron deity; however, the fact that her veneration is largely farcical, not to mention the society's over-riding investment in non-violent guerilla warfare, sets them apart from reconstructed Paganism.

The Discordian Society did not solidify into a distinct faction until its members integrated the sacramental use of LSD into its beliefs. The first major Discordian holy book, an anthology of humorous writings edited by Hill entitled *The Principia Discordia* (1965), is nothing if not a testament to their enthusiasm for the psychedelic expansion of

consciousness. Armed with their own scriptures, members of the Discordian fellowship allied themselves with the growing brotherhood of psychedelicist churches. For his part, Hill exchanged initiations with Art Kleps (patriarch of the Neo-American Church), as well as Jefferson "Fuck" Poland (head of the Psychedelic Venus Society). Similarly, Thornley became an active member in Kerista, a utopian fellowship that took root on the fringes of the Beat Generation, and grew exponentially as LSD flooded into bohemian enclaves. Like their allies in the psychedelicist church movement, the Discordian Society regarded cannabis, mescaline, and LSD as not mere drugs, but as keys to unlocking humanity's highest potential. In addition to their sacramental ideology, the Discordians shared other demonstrable traits with their sister churches, such as a commitment to pacifism, free love, and the glorification of humor as a theological language. That said, there is little trace of the separatist tendency that characterized the movement of psychedelic churches; rather, their clandestine program of "mindfucking" pranksterism, placed them closer to the Youth International Party (or "Yippies!"), Up Against the Wall Mother Fuckers, and other similarly militant "Flower Power" sects. The Discordian Society organized itself as a nonhierarchical organization, according to the anarchist principles that informed all these groups. However, unlike their attention-seeking counterparts, the Discordians modeled themselves after a secret society, and organized their religious fellowship as a horizontal network of cells termed "cabals". From the standpoint of praxis, the followers of Eris sought to mirror the shadow play of governmental intelligence agencies by acting behind the scenes.

Acting as a psychedelic intelligence agency, the Discordian Society instituted a pair of organizational principals designed to obscure the numbers, as well as the aims, of their group. The first was *Project Pan-Pontification*, which ordained every member of the fellowship an infallible "Pope", and therefore subject to no source of authority external to the self. Such indiscriminant inclusion made it so that anyone, anywhere, could be a Discordian co-conspirator pursuing their own, autonomous Operation Mindfuck scheme. Hence, Discordians are all hierarchs, yet not hierarchically positioned above anyone else. The second principle, however, dialectically counteracted such inclusivity, as Discordians were obliged to excommunicate any fellow member they encountered. Thus the slogan,

"we Discordians stick apart". Working in tandem, these organizational principles made it so that Discordian co-conspirators could never be sure who or what was involved in Operation Mindfuck. Altogether, Discordianism was designed as a *ludibrium*, an intentional form of play in which the identities of the players were as incomprehensible as their subversive objectives.

The initial stimulus for Operation Mindfuck was the Garrison investigation of 1968. As District Attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison organized his own, independent inquiry of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and over the course of his highly publicized probe, the investigation team concluded that Thornley and the Discordians were part of a CIA-led conspiracy to kill the president. Moreover, the Discordians, Garrison alleged, framed Lee Harvey Oswald as the "lone gunman". (Garrison's theory hinged on the fact that Oswald and Thornley served in the Marines together; and incredibly, the Discordian patriarch wrote a novel about the alleged sniper three years *before* the assassination). In response to the allegation, Thornley's fellowship inundated the DA's office with bizarre and imposing communiqués signed by the Bavarian Illuminati. Here, the Discordians were exploiting the fact that Alan Chapman, a member of Garrison's investigation team, believed that this shadowy group were likewise involved in the assassination. Operation Mindfuck did not stop there. The scope of the Discordian counter-intelligence campaign expanded as members of the society, many of whom were journalists, inserted pieces about the Illuminati into mainstream media sources, as well as the underground press. The Discordian Illuminati thesis offered a dualistic cosmological picture in which the fate of the world hung in the balance between the sinister forces of the Illuminati (backed by the Ancient Ones of H.P. Lovecraft's horror fiction) and the Discordian Society, here portrayed as an ancient religious order of mystical anarchists. Much to the delight of the Discordian Society, their Illuminati narrative gained traction within the psychedelicist uprising, which by the final years of the 1960s was reaching its apogee across the US.

The Discordian Society did not emerge into public consciousness until the publication of *Illuminatus!* (1975), a revisionist history of the psychedelicist insurgency disguised as a

trilogy of pulp novels. A testament to the militant turn of psychedelic populism, this voluminous tome was authored by two Chicago-based Discordian conspirators, Robert Shea (b. 1933-1994) and →Robert Anton Wilson (b. 1958-1999), who portrayed the battle between the so-called “hippies” and the establishment as a proxy war in the cosmic struggle explicated by the Discordian Illuminati thesis. In a narrative studded with labyrinthine conspiracies, the US government is depicted as a front for the Illuminati, which is beholden to alien entities whose evil designs are beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Casting members of their own faction as characters in the story, Wilson and Shea portrayed the psychedelic opposition as an underground tradition of illumination, which Discordian cabals have passed down since the time of Atlantis in the distant past. The plot combines campy narrative elements with experimental writing techniques engineered to “mindfuck” the reader into questioning the nature of reality. As explained in one of the text’s fourteen appendixes, the text was designed to leave the reader in a state of total psychological indeterminacy, much in the fashion of an LSD trip.

Wilson and Shea finished work on *Illuminatus!* by 1971, and believed its publication would revitalize the waning Flower Power insurgency. However, their immodest expectations were dashed as its publisher, Dell, delayed production for six years. By the time *Illuminatus!* hit newsstands in 1975, the zeitgeist had shifted. The optimism of the text felt embarrassingly anachronistic for the now-jaded partisans of the Flower Power movement, which had subsequently turned towards the violent ideology of “armed love”.

Following the publication of *Illuminatus!*, Discordianism had split into two tendencies. The Erisian school, led by Thornley, advocated an anarchist interpretation of Beat Zen, the ecstatic strain of Occidental Buddhism/Daoism chiefly explicated in the theological treatises of Alan Watts, the novels of Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder’s poetry. Thornley, writing under the *nom de guerre* Ho Chi Zen, described the doctrines of this school as “Zenarchy,” a portmanteau of Zen and anarchy. Other members of the Erisian school included Camden Benares (b. John Overton), author of *Zen Without Zen Masters* (1977), as well as the accredited Zen master and student of Seung Sahn, Tundra Wind (b. Jim Wilson). Together, these second wave Beat Zennists formed a small but vocal sangha,

which commanded a sizable audience in the boom in underground publishing known as the "zine scene" of the mid-1980s.

The other, more prominent branch of the Discordian Society formed around Wilson and Shea, whose *Illuminatus!* trilogy attracted a cult following on the fringes of science fiction fandom. Here, admirers cultivated a robust intellectual culture within the medium of fanzines, which included *The Golden APA* (1979-2003), Arthur Hlavaty's *Fan-Shaped Destiny*, and Ed Zdrojewski's *The Benton Harbor Rat-Weasel*. The centerpiece of this textual community was Shea's own zine, *No Governor*, which featured the major players in the Discordian Society, including Wilson, Thornley, and Hill. This zine served as an open literary forum for discussing their enchanted doctrines of anarcho-chaos over and against the seemingly desiccated tradition of Leftist secularism. Presuming that the necessary point of departure for radical politics was the psychedelic expansion of consciousness, the Discordians denigrated anarchism, which they associated with rigid ideological dogmas, and in its place advocated anarchy, which they interpreted as the condition of freedom necessary for true autonomy.

Though ignored by reviewers, the *Illuminatus!* trilogy sold over 100,000 copies over the course of the 1980s. The steady growth of the society was linked to the emergence of the →Church of the SubGenius, a revivalist sect of psychedelic pranksters, which appropriated the Discordian Illuminati thesis into its own intentionally bizarre mythos. The Church also absorbed Discordian personnel into its ranks, and openly honored its patriarchs, especially Thornley, as "saints". Setting into motion the rise of the zine, this united front of psychedelic factions led the way in what was regarded as the "neo-psychedelic renaissance", a phrase coined by the Discordian futurist, R.U. Sirius.

Outside of the populist front led by the SubGenius Church, the Discordian continued to amass a following among the "lunatic fringe" on the Far Right of libertarianism and Ultra-Left of anarchism. This unusual confluence of positions can be traced back to the fact that the foremost Discordian patriarchs, Wilson and Thornley, were both enthralled by Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism as adolescents, and neither ever fully rejected

it over the course of their intellectual maturation. Commenting on the fact that every type of extremist were drawn to the Discordian ludibrium, Thornley wryly observed, "[i]f organized religion is the opium of the masses, then disorganized religion is the marijuana of the lunatic fringe". As demonstrated by the notorious Cold War spy, Hagbard Celine (né Karl Koch, b. 1965-1989), the early hacking community was a hotbed for this disorganized religion. With its focus on "mindfucking" pranks, Discordianism proved perfectly suited for these technophilic rebels who carried the religion with them as they colonized cyberspace throughout the early 1990s.

Discordians have undertaken a number of institutionalization efforts since the millennium. Projects orchestrated under the rubric of Operation Mindfuck have declined, with the notable exception of the Krewe of Eris, who regularly terrorizes the overly commercialized Mardi Gras festivities held annually in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today, the most recognizable Discordian projects are Adam Gorightly's online archive, *Historia Discordia*, an online school dedicated to the ideas of Robert Anton Wilson formally known as the Maybe Logic Academy, and the *Cosmic Trigger Play*, an amateur theatre production based out of the UK. These professional endeavors attracted the attention of scholars, who hastily proclaimed that Discordianism was paradigmatic of a new style of belief, alternately termed "parody religion", "invented religion", and "hyper-real religion". Based on a salient lack of primary source research, these typologies will not likely stand the test of time; nonetheless, they serve as instructive waymarkers for further excavations into this wildly multifarious fellowship.

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